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The Canonical Black Body: Alternative African American Religions and the Disruptive Politics of Sacrality

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Abstract: “The Canonical Black Body” argues that central to the study of African American religions is a focus on the black body and the production and engagement of canons on the sacred black body within the black public sphere. Furthermore, this essay suggests that, by paying attention to alternative African American religions in the twentieth century, we can better engage the relationship between African American religion and the long history of creating these canons on the black body, debating their relationship to black freedom, and circulating the canons to contest the oppressive, exclusive practices of modern democracy. Through a critical engagement of the fields of Black Theology and New Religious Movements and using the resources offered by Delores Williams’ accounts of variety and experience and Vincent Wimbush’s category of signifying, this essay will argue for how a return to the body provides resources and tools for not only theorizing African American religions but thinking about the production and creation of competing black publics, including the important role of alternative black sacred publics.

Keywords: alternative religions; Black Theology; African American religions; black body; womanism; black public; canon; scripture

1. Introduction

A number of recent studies engaging African American religions have focused primarily on what has traditionally been called “new” African American religions. These studies are important not because of their focus on the chronological emergence of new religious movements, but what a focus on the new or the alternative augurs for the study of African American religions. From Sylvester Johnson’s magisterial work on the long-range impact of empire to Judith Weisenfeld’s critical reappraisal of black migration in the twentieth century, central to their analysis is the appearance and practice of new religions.¹ This focus on new or alternative religious movements is important because of the ways in which the studies destabilize the emphasis or focus on black Christianity or the Biblical scripture as the normative text for African Americans in place of what Weisenfeld calls a renewed focus on the adherents’ construction of a “racial-religious” identity.² Furthermore, in these works, there is a call to delve more fully into the ways in which African American religion is about the black body and how a meditation on that body is crucial to the negotiation of empire, democracy, citizenship and belonging.

In Sylvester Johnson’s engagement of African American religion, he suggests that African American Religious Studies has as its call to take a more thoughtful and engaging account of the Western empire.³ He argues clearly that empire both haunts and shapes the construction of African

¹ See (Weisenfeld 2016). Also see (Johnson 2015).

² (Weisenfeld 2016).

³ (Johnson 2015).

American religion and calls for theorists of African American religion to look more fully at the impact and import of thinking about the relationship between African American religion, state surveillance, and practices of belonging. Moreover, Vincent Wimbush, New Testament scholar and Director of the Institute on Signifying Scripture, argues that religion, specifically African American religion, has been shaped by the practices of signifying on the dominant themes and ideas in the public domain. Blackness, for Wimbush, is a long history of signifying on and the interpolating of dominant regimes, practices, and texts (insert footnote for (Wimbush 2008), *Theorizing Scriptures—I am scared to add this one additional footnote—Vincent L. Wimbush, Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon, Signifying (on) Scriptures* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008).). These significations lead to alternative expressions of democracy, Christianity, Christian adjacent movements, and the appearance of new religious movements. Similarly, the works that are being done by Judith Weisenfeld and John Jackson all point to alternative religions as a means to understand African American religion and their relationship to the nation-state and empire.⁴ The modern nation-state and the imperial practices and systems associated with the construction of the nation-state have destroyed and demonized the black body, used exclusionary practices to deny the appearance and flourishing of the black citizen, and constructed canons, institutions and texts which prevent or attempt to limit the presence and persistence of alternative epistemological or philosophical irruptions.⁵ All of these theorists return to new religions; therefore, their work is as much about the resistance to dominant and normative religious systems as it is about black America's encounter with a failed democratic system and the demand and articulation for greater participation.⁶

As a result of their work, the study of black religion continues to decenter the role of black Christianity and black theology and has begun to explicitly return to the archive and the experience of 20th and 21st century African American religious experiences. In this essay, black religion is defined as those organized spaces where African Americans gather to engage and interact with the sacred. This notion of sacred is an expansive term, and in this account, I understand sacred or sacrality as symbols, ideas or a physical presence that disrupts, constrains, or reframes the everyday or the profane. The sacred is a disruption of epistemological and political practices that deny or occlude the other or an-other. Sacred does not, therefore, have to be connected with a divinity or otherworldly force, but it does supplant or challenge certain philosophical and epistemological understandings that deny its possibility. Therefore, black religion in this essay is a production of African American communities and institutions' construction of sacrality and their communication of the sacred via conversations, scripts, scriptures, and the production of new canons. Black theology, on the other hand, has focused on the engagement of African American Christianity and examining the philosophical and hermeneutical practices that are dominant in its production and evolution. This essay will address the ways in which, by closely attending to the production and engagement of the idea of the sacred in African American Christianity as well as movements outside of it, insight is provided into the role and deployment of the black body and the black body's relationship to black participation in the modern moment.

While the return to archive and experience are important for any account of African American religion, this essay will primarily focus on the canonical and critical role that the black body plays in the construction of religion and African American religions' negotiation with empire and democracy. Furthermore, it will argue that the black body as sacred space is the central script or scripture which is engaged, debated, and circulated within the black public. The black public has been a heavily contested term. Some have argued that the black public comprises those entities that have the

⁴ (Evans 2008).

⁵ See (West 1982). West provides a thoughtful and critical account of African and African Americans exclusion from the Western project.

⁶ (Jackson 2013).

power and influence to engage in the political and social sphere.⁷ Many early theorists of the black public imagined the leaders of it and the texts that comprised it as texts and persons whose main responsibility was to translate black needs and concerns to a dominant audience or set of institutions (Higginbotham 1994). As the term evolved, “the black public” functioned as the dominant group amongst many black publics that often seem to determine the hegemonic ways to address or unpack certain ideas of black belonging. In this essay, the black public include both the dominant groups as well as recognizes the important and insurgent role of alternate publics, which include but are not limited to alternative religions, radical political formations, and groups and institutions that challenged normative gender, race, and sexual identities. All of these groups are vying for attention or articulating differences of opinion among different groups of black institutions, thinkers, discourses, and ideas.⁸ Therefore, any thoughtful engagement of African American religion in the modern Western world must include the construction, deliberation, and deployment of the sacred black body and the role it plays in the multiple publics outlined above.

The sacred black body in this argument highlights the significant and signifying role that the black body plays in the African American public and within the African American religious tradition. By highlighting its sacred dimensions, this essay is suggesting that the black body is doing more than just representing African American experience. Rather, the black body is seen as meditation on or representation of the larger concerns of black existence and black humanity. This sacralization, or the process by which the body becomes the central motif and simultaneously participates in and makes a transcendent claim on black peoples’ participation in and creation of democracy, is at the core of African American religion. The sacralization of the black body stands as a religious or canonized construction of texts, ideas, and practices, a response to the exclusive and colonizing practices of Western modernity and settler-based democracy. The circulation and negotiation of the sacred black body, both physically and symbolically, is the means of challenging the larger public, articulating alternatives, and developing new models of participating (or new models of religion). What is new about this argument is not just the appearance of the body, but how the body is sacralized, how scripts and ideas about the body are circulated, and how the black body functions as a signification on modernity, empire, and the failed promise of democracy. Therefore, as empire and modernity become more adept at its body-shaming, body-excluding practices, African American religions must create counter scripts that imagine worlds and spaces where black bodies can be recognized as sacred and have the capacity and opportunity to flourish.⁹ Thus, this attention to new religions is to follow the ever-changing shape and discourse on black bodies as a way to chart the black publics’ demands for visibility and participation.

These visions for or concerns about the black body, nevertheless, like most African American religions, see their impact on both the sacred and everyday.¹⁰ Thus, African American religions are ones that simultaneously make claims about the sacred black body as well as the black body politic. This methodology argues that African American religion is about repairing the breach/disjuncture between the frayed and fragile relationship between black bodies under the constraints of Western capitalism and failed democracy and a vision of full black participation. As a result, this essay will look at the ways in which the methods of black theology and alternative religious movements attempt to make space for the variety of African American religions. Secondly, this essay will argue that it

⁷ See (Higginbotham 1994). See her discussion of the black counter public. I am arguing that the alternative publics are what make up the black public or what Higginbotham calls the counter public.

⁸ (Dawson 2002).

⁹ See (Douglas 2012). Note the important work that Brown Douglas does on the imperial design to shame and denigrate black bodies and how that shame around black bodies and sexuality impact African American religion and African American Christianity in her theorization.

¹⁰ (Dawson 2002). Dawson’s understanding of Black visions is important as he is situating black visions of black bodily transcendence with a deep archive of black visions for freedom. These visions include within them an attention to the particularities of black political and social relations as well as a transformation of the larger economic, political and social system.

is the return to the body and the circulation of texts and ideas that sacralize the black body that is found in the works of Kelley Brown Douglas, Delores Williams, and Wimbush's project of signifying on religious traditions that is so important for this new direction. Finally, this essay states that the engagement and creation of a canon on the sacred black body is the primary goal of African American religion. It will address the ways that a turn to alternative religions, a theoretical reconsideration of religious variety or multivocality in womanist and black feminist thinkers, and a nuanced account of competing black publics, including black sacred publics, highlight the central role of the sacred black body.

2. The Foundation of Black Theology

Black theology is a critically important method in reading and deciphering the role of African American religion in North America. While Black theology had at its center a primary focus on the concerns of black Christian communities and readings of normative texts and scriptures, the method always pushed for new ways to address black experience and to return to the archive of black religious communities.¹¹ The black theological method, therefore, has been, and in many circles continues to be, informed by a focus on certain communities of belonging that make it useful in reading certain patterns and practices, but it is often insufficient in its reading of alternative and popular religious movements. This essay is not calling for the jettisoning of the black theological method, but rather it is calling for the expansion of its method to include variety, dissonance and variability as central to its method. It is following in the admonition of theorists of black theology and black religion such as Anthony Pinn, Charles Long, Emilie Towne, Delores Williams, and other theorists to move beyond Christian orthodoxy and a limited view of the black public and its inevitable recourse to the black church. Anthony Pinn captures this best when he argues in his *Varieties* that "African American theological reflection troubles me because it limits itself to Christianity in ways that establish Christian doctrine and concerns as normative."¹² He then continues by asking, "how does theology address traditions that fall outside the Christian context, traditions that are contrary to, if not hostile toward, the basic claims of Christian faith?"¹³

Black Theology has centered its analysis primarily on the reading of the Biblical text and on the role of black Christian groups in their reading of that text. This movement to the Biblical text and Christianity was useful in that it unearthed one aspect of God talk and its formative role in the development of black publics, both dominant and alternative. It suggested that black Christianities and their engagement with Christian texts was essential in expanding what counted for and should be considered theological language.¹⁴ In Anthony Pinn's and other theorists' accounts of Black Theology, we are reminded that for all of its limitations it made visible and essential that black Americans' relationship to Christianity could be and was quite often very different from other groups' relationship to and interaction with the category of Christianity. Furthermore, Pinn suggests, and this is signaled throughout black theological language, that it is not just black Americans' relationship to Christianity but it is black America's relationship to religion.¹⁵ Religion plays a critically important role and once we take seriously that black folk's theological efforts are not constrained by normative theological categories, the resources of African American religion begin to fully inform the production and construction of black life.

¹¹ See the limits of the black theology as an interpreter of black humanist and black artistic rhetoric. See (Pinn 2003).

¹² (Pinn 1998, pp. 48–50).

¹³ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁴ By world mapping, I am referring to Tom Tweed who suggests that religion is primarily about crossing and dwelling and that these itineraries and journeys are a critical part of mapping the world and carving out niches and opportunities for creating meaning and identifying opportunities for participation in the political and religious space. For Tweed like John Jackson, where one is and what that person is doing is critically important to understanding the role and goal of religion. See (Tweed 2006).

¹⁵ (Pinn 2002).

It is the move away from the traditional theological categories or at least a critique of the limitations of those categories that make Delores Williams and her critique of black theology so important. Williams', 25 years after the publication of her *Sisters of the Wilderness*, critique of patriarchy and certain constructions of black Christianity was premised not simply on a critique of male domination and male violence but also the construction of knowledge that was intent on denying or occluding the full participation of other bodies. Therefore, it is instructive that Williams' intervention was not just an escape from the dominant or heterosexual gaze, but she was highlighting the complex identities and political formations that take place within new and resistant constructions of religion, gender, and race.¹⁶ We see this impulse in the earlier works of black theologians such as James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglas, but they often name these other sources as a resource for African American Christianity rather than seeing the production of these discourses as the emergence of alternative publics or alternative religions. The willingness to look far afield and to see the processes by which these discourses, sometimes in conversation with Christianity and sometimes not, open up venues for African American liberation and new variables in the field of African American religions is critical for this new method in African American religions. Black freedom and black religion did not always have to engage or entertain Christianity in order to make a claim on the black public sphere. Womanists, such as Emilie Townes and Dianne Stewart, began the work of looking for those other religious movements and moments where black freedom could be accessed and the sacred black body could and was at the center of the discourse. Womanists have pointed theorists in the direction of accessing other sources to find these movements without necessarily returning to the Christian narrative. By invoking black women's literature, black women's experience, and crucially the role of alternative religious and spiritual practices throughout the diaspora, womanists have expanded the method by which we engage black religions, the public within which these discourses circulate, and the possibilities of movements that are actively engaging the question of black freedom and the sacrality of the black body.¹⁷ The expansive nature of the womanist interrogation means that we are looking at much more complex and numerous accounts of religious practices and identities. This is a gesture toward the alternative or the unnamed that has often been rejected in response to the constraints or concerns with black respectability. The womanist concerns and ultimate dismissal of the logics and politics of respectability and their ultimate recovery of the black body open up a wider purview for discussion of not only African American religion but black responses to the modern world.

3. The Limits of New Religious Movements

The quest for these other religious spaces has led thinkers of African American religion to explore other methodological paradigms. Cultural Anthropology, Critical Theory, and Diaspora Studies have been fertile spaces and they have opened the possibility of looking more fully at the multiple forces that shape black life and flourishing.¹⁸ In addition to anthropology and other fields of study, there is the field of New Religions or New Religious Movements that has methodologically argued for an intervention that could be useful for the study and engagement of African American religion. This intervention, according to Weisenfeld, often places too great of an emphasis on the new or the different. The methods of new religions look at the emergence of new language, new patterns, the role of iconic and prophetic figures, and the ways that communities of people attempt to create new language, scripture and protocol to address the failure of the modern world view.¹⁹ This description of new religion is useful in that it articulates the black American struggle with modernity, but Weisenfeld and others want to resist the idea that these are new. Rather than focusing on the "new" nature of these practices, Weisenfeld and others all point to ways in which these movements are engaged in

¹⁶ See the definition of womanism in (Walker 1983).

¹⁷ See the introduction of (Floyd-Thomas 2006).

¹⁸ See (Frederick 2003; Jackson 2013).

¹⁹ See (Curtis and Sigler 2009).

similar acts as earlier ones and that the descriptor of “new” may highlight a chronological distinction, but it fails to fully outline the ways in which this has been an essential aspect of black religiosity since the middle passage. The focus, therefore, is not on the new, but on the continued use of religion, specifically all the alternatives made available in competing black publics, as a way for black bodies and knowledges to engage the broader public.

Similarly, the field of New Religious Movements has primarily been constrained by an attention to the non-normative religious practices engaged primarily by normative bodies. This focus on normative whiteness often leads these studies to fail the litmus test of what religion means for marginalized and limited black bodies. Jackson highlights the limitations of New Religious Movements in his evocative text when he suggests if these movements are read solely as engagements with philosophical asides or eccentricities, then that method is rendered negligible or not very useful for the theorizing black religion.²⁰ Religion or African American religion is not a philosophical aside, but it is at the core of African Americans’ engagement with democracy and participation in the modern world. African American religion is a world-mapping and world-making exercise or the negotiation and creation of a public. In this examination, world-mapping is the process by which the constraints and norms of the current situation are evaluated and assessed, and world-making is the process by which new publics and discourses are created in order to disrupt the logics or constraints of maps that have been dismissive of black bodies and black freedom. New methods in African American religions must therefore attend to the world-mapping/world-making apparatus of black religions and black religious-affiliated movements. How do these movements not only attend to the structure of space, ritual, and beliefs, but also create the possibility of these projects in the realm and logic of black bodies? How are they engagements with citizenship, belonging and empire? While both New Religions and Black Theology both open the possibility of thinking beyond the normative space of black Christian communities, these methods have often marginalized or misrepresented the voices that will ultimately help us understand the nature and shape of African American religion more broadly.

4. Signifying as Disruption of “Sacred” Publics

Signifying is the process by which a group or a person challenges, disrupts, or reformulates a normative script or set of ideas. This tactic or strategy is central to Wimbush and his understanding of African American religion. For Wimbush, African American religion is a series of significations on and around the canonical texts of whiteness and white supremacy. In Wimbush’s fascinating text, *White Men’s Magic*, he returns to a classic text in the black public and its attempt to achieve full participation in the modern world, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*. Thus, it is important to note that when Wimbush evokes the category of scripture and its relationship to black world-making, he does not begin with the Biblical text or even selected texts from the scriptural narrative, rather he looks at the world-mapping and making text of Olaudah Equiano.²¹ His engagement of Equiano is illustrative for the study of African American religions in that its focus on the production and deployment of an iconic, transnational text in the form of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*.²² *The Interesting Narrative* is iconic in the same way that Wimbush argues that the Bible was for the construction of white identity. The Equiano narrative is deliberately a text about black identity and the construction of black identity that is signifying on and has been used to signify on modernity, empire, and the

²⁰ See (Jackson 2013).

²¹ In *White Men’s Magic*, Wimbush is careful to note the importance that the Bible has for the creation and maintenance of white supremacy-based settler democracy and how that canonical text has relevance not only for those who have power in that matrix, but that it also has resonance for those who are seeking it. Other groups’ interest in and approach to the biblical text were not because of a particular allegiance to the biblical narrative or even any structural or theoretical overlap with earlier or indigenous religions, but purely because of the power that those in power accrued as a result of their relationship to the text.

²² (Wimbush 2012).

failed assimilation of the black subject. Equiano is canonical not because it is an exhaustive account of black existence, but it highlights the need for a text or the desire for a narrative (in Equiano's situation) that will provide a model for new world black citizens.²³ Equiano's text is important in the ways that it constructs a mechanism for dealing with biblical and other scriptural texts, while at the same time becoming canonical and critical to the black public. Equiano creates in the 19th century world a space for his physical body as well as the movement of that body through physical and symbolic spaces. He is making a world that responds to the unique concerns and constraints of African-American/African-European migrants at that time.²⁴ His text is a canonical script for black world making or African American religion because at its center is the construction of black identity and that identity's relationship to citizenship. This attention to Equiano is not as the adherent of mainline or normative Christian tradition, but rather as the creator of a dominant signification. Equiano is disrupting the "sacred" public of whiteness and normative Christianity and offering an example of creating alternative scripts and making a world and engaging new publics through these texts and ideas. While Equiano does not actively disrupt, his text and the slave narrative are used as a disruption. Equiano becomes the key mechanism to highlight the role of the black body and the ways that it cannot be free under the constraints of Western Empire and capitalism. *The Interesting Narrative* in many black publics is not circulated as an exemplar of black freedom or upward mobility, but rather it highlights the failure of the Western empire and early forms of democracy to truly be available to the black body. Equiano's tragic narrative is one that reminds the reader and generations of world-makers that there must be a critical reappraisal or rejection of European Christianity, democracy, and empire.

Similarly, the second and third generation of black theological thinkers, primarily using womanism as their method, have been known for their engagement and critique of normative Christian traditions. In Delores Williams' groundbreaking text *Sisters in the Wilderness*, she is not only articulating the limitations of Christian scripture and the logics of dehumanization for black women in many of these scriptures, she is also pointing out the possibilities of new and alternative religious and Christian movements. For Williams and many who followed her, the resources for thinking about African American religion do not begin in the assimilation of mainstream religious modalities but the ingenious and subterranean responses to the question of the religious.²⁵ Williams' book, Emilie Townes' account of Brazilian religious practices, and Dianne Stewart's account of Jamaican spirituality point toward and are an inflection of the black woman's variety, creativity and the desire for new and authentic spaces that make a world amenable to their bodies, needs and demands.²⁶ This attention to the new is what Williams is outlining in this "midrash" or scriptural account of Tamar and her life after she exits the purview of the biblical writers. Tamar, for Williams, is someone who, like Equiano, tries to follow the dominant script of the Jewish community, but by the end of the narrative, like many black women in the modern era, Tamar has been physically and sexually abused, disposed of and rendered unfit to participate in mainstream political and religious spheres, and left to construct or at least consider the possibilities of a counter-narrative. Williams is articulating the central role of new religions or what Stephanie Camp has often called the "truancy" of black women. The new or

²³ In Henry Louis Gates' introduction to the Harvard Edition of the Equiano slave narrative, Gates argues that the Equiano text is critically important because of its circulation amongst different publics but also the ways in which its structure and format become canonical for the genre of slave narratives. This genre in Gates' analysis is crucial for a particular telling of new world blacks' desire not only for freedom but for its opening of constructive and imaginative possibilities for black contributions to the new world public. Equiano is not looking for a space outside of modernity, but he is clearly critical of modernity and sees the intrusion of the black body as both a disruption and an opportunity for something new.

²⁴ While the Equiano text can be read as the proto-typical African American subject, his references to his explicit African past as well as his movement within the Americas and Europe complicate what might be assumed as a stable identity. I think it is best to assume that Equiano is best understood as a new world citizen who is attempting to make sense of both his African culture as well as the American and European cultures that he came to be a part of. His narrative is one that heavily relies on the impact of this movement on his body and his relationship to other bodies.

²⁵ (Williams 1993).

²⁶ (Townes 2006; Stewart 2005).

alternative religion provides an opportunity for “truancy” in that it offers a break or a respite from the dominant world system.²⁷ Often, this break is short-lived or it seems to only speak to one area of a marginalized or oppressed person’s life, but in reality this “truancy” works as a total restructuring of the marginalized person’s body in relation to the dominant space. Camp outlines how engaging the enslaved body in time and space allows us to see how the enslaved “claimed, animated, personalized, and enjoyed their bodies.”²⁸ Camp is articulating the very genesis of black religion with black women’s truancy from dominant spaces of white oppression and the reclamation of black women’s bodies.

In the case of Williams and the story of Tamar, the alternative religion is one that is required as a result of being jettisoned, rejected or forgotten by the mainstream or normative tradition. However, Camp and her language of “rival geographies” or that of women’s “third bodies” takes on a much needed but qualitatively different intervention. Camp argues that, while it may seem that women, especially black women, stay in and accept these normative spaces and institutions, these models of periodic physical, emotional, or symbolic escape highlight one aspect of their resistance and challenge the idea that alternative religions are either new or an absolute acceptance of one system or the other.²⁹ In the claim that it is possible to love another woman or it is possible to love a man and a woman simultaneously, Williams and others are highlighting the ways that alternative publics or new religions are not constrained by an allegiance to one text, one script, or even one God. Therefore, this attention to the alternative or the alternative that is adjacent to the normative tradition is what informs the womanist method and this method of African American religions to account for or engage movements that might seem to solidify mainstream notions but are actually doing other work. This is one of the important insights of womanist thought—the multi-vocality (the logic of signifying) of any one institution and the resistance to prioritizing/privileging one vision of freedom over the other.

Furthermore, the import of the multiple or mutually constituting identities is exactly what womanist theorists were trying to outline in relation to intersectionality, and it is equally important in relation to multiple religious identities. The fact that one adopts or engages one religious identity does not preclude him/her from adopting another one. The rejection of the puritanical, homo-textual impulse in the late modern era is critical to engaging black women’s religion and survival. The idea that more than one truth or that multiple truths could exist at the same time is experienced as anathema in the framework of normative Western culture. Nevertheless, black humanity and specifically black women’s identity have tended to argue for a space for alternatives to the lie of an “abstract universal.” The story of black identity has been the spectacle of and the demand for new symbols, ideas, and literally the new subject or body.³⁰ The universal is displaced by multiple narratives, truths, and stories. This is the space that Walter Dignolo calls the “pluriversal” and in that space is the opportunity to reject the abstract universal of democracy, Christianity, and even religion that often elide and deny black bodies and their variety of experiences.³¹

²⁷ See (Camp 2004). While Camp’s work is illustrative for black women and everyday resistance to the physicality enslavement, it is also important for thinking about the ways that this resistance and sabbatical make room for the flowering of new religious traditions, the critique of hegemonic formations, and the celebration of new modes of resistance in the midst of their current resistance. Camp’s work is not read as a model for thinking about religion, but her work is important for thinking about the philosophical and epistemological space needed to create new mappings of the world.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alice Walker’s definition of womanism has been instructive to many generations of womanist and black feminist thinkers. It remains instructive for thinkers of alternative religions because of the emphasis that it places on fluidity and discontinuity. See (Walker 1983).

³⁰ I use the term spectacle here, because I am arguing that the disruption of white supremacy and the lie of abstract universals in the form of white culture is often experienced as a radical and explosive interruption by the mainstream. For the black body to articulate itself as a part of the body politic or to see itself as the canonical scripture of African Americans is a spectacle or a disruption of the normative representations of the black body. See (Dignolo 1995). Also see “Spectacular Blackness”.

³¹ (Dignolo 2000).

5. The Problems and Promise of Black Canonicity

The sacred black body stands at the center of the black canon and the set of scripts and institutions that engage and circulate these texts. Canonicity or the black canon does not have to be another model of exclusion and domination, but if canonicity is code for white supremacy or any type of religious or political hegemony, then it cannot operate in the service of black freedom. Moreover, as Wimbush and the Williams have so provocatively argued, epistemological and methodological hegemony are examples of this problematic form of canonicity or what some have identified as the politics of exclusion. In those cases, canonicity is a local project that has masqueraded as a universal project and thus denied alternative or other projects resistant to the dominant canon.³² Vincent Wimbush in his critique of Biblical studies and Lewis Gordon, black philosopher and thinker of black existentialism, in his critique of the university system highlight the ways that canon, method, and epistemological privilege mitigate or prevent the full reading of African and African American expression.³³ Gordon continues that these biases or cul-de-sacs prevent the study of African American communities and the engagement of these communities as liberatory spaces. It is not surprising, therefore, that Gordon, Wimbush, and Williams all see the need to evacuate and create new methodological paradigms in order to do their work. Thus, the university or the discipline as the maintainer of a specific canon become suspicious or problematic. Nevertheless, this does mean that the term or the idea of canonicity needs to be evacuated. Canon as a colonial gesture or a maintenance of systematic oppression/exclusion must be abandoned, but the attention to texts that are circulated, sampled, and engaged in communities of belonging are central to understanding the project and logic of African American religious communities.³⁴

As a result, Williams and Townes in their evocation of black women's experience or Wimbush in engaging the "textures, gestures and texts" of local communities are locating the subaltern or non-traditional ways in which canon is constructed, negotiated, and then used in communities.³⁵ This alternative canon is paramount, because it centers the concerns of the community members and provides insights into their vision and version of an alternative reality. Therefore, the canon is not just the text, but the creation, interpretation, and circulation of the texts in the community. Katie Cannon's groundbreaking work on African American Christianity and women's experience explicitly points to the role of text but also highlights the role of interpretation and ultimately its formative logic in specific communities.³⁶ The reading of black religious communities from the position of new and alternative religions requires a renewed attention to what becomes canonical and who determines canonicity. Therefore, it is important to understand what work canon is doing for these communities. In many new religious movements, the prophet/founder and his texts become canonical. These texts are circulated as a means to make a broader argument about the transcendent or compelling narrative of the moment, but this circulation and the canonizing of language, ideas, bodies, and even songs functions as a way to create a counter-script or narrative to the dominant discourse. Father Divine and the International Peace Mission Movement in the middle of the twentieth century is a primary example of how canonical texts, symbols and language do not just provide language or framing for the internal community of adherents or believers. Rather, new religious movements are providing language and ideology to counter and correct external canonical ideas and symbols. For Divine, the canonical vessel of his black body being the divine not only provides theological orientation for the

³² (Mignolo 2000).

³³ See (Wimbush 2008; Gordon 2006).

³⁴ It is important to note here that canon and scripture both have the imprint or impulse of hegemony, but Cannon, Gordon, and Wimbush are also suggesting that there are alternative means of deploying these discursive frameworks that can work for the benefit of the marginalized and oppressed.

³⁵ (Wimbush 2008).

³⁶ See (Cannon 1995). This text alongside Delores Williams highlights that a critical feature of African American religious identity is the creation of new canons, traditions, and ethics that fully respond to the needs and concerns of African Americans as full humans and citizens.

adherents but in its sacralization and canonization of the black body it responded to the impasse and the problem of blackness and oppression in the twentieth century.

In the example of Father Divine, it is clear that the canon or the new script functions as a counter-narrative over and against the erasure of black bodies and the denial or surveillance of black religious freedom. In many of these movements, the canon includes, but is not limited to, texts, but most importantly reframes or resituates the sacred black body. The black body becomes the canonical corpus upon which black flourishing and freedom are articulated. It is not a mistake that Father Divine is the actual body of the divine or that the well-fed, well-dressed bodies of the black participants are so critical to these alternative movements. Furthermore, if the canon is en-fleshed in the actual body of black leaders, participants, and symbols, the canon is extended by the response of other black bodies to these symbols or ideas. In this regard, the canon is a repository of religious, political and cultural responses to the fraught and compromised black body. Therefore, it is not surprising that the leaders' bodies are venerated and actually stand in for the sacred black body and that the physical repairing or presentation of the black body become a central apparatus for the production of sacred space. Space in these movements becomes sacred by the appearance and resistance of the black body in the forms of love feasts where Father divine fed, engaged, and entertained his adherents, the protests of the Nation of Islam, and the parades of Marcus Garvey and his African nationalism movement. Thus, methods of African American religion must pay close attention to the ways in which the black body is canonized and how the presentation or protection of the black body is central to the world-making logic of African American religions. In this sense, all black publics that engage with the black body are "black sacred publics."

The black or alternative canon, however, is one that is porous and flexible. The logic from the study of new and alternative religions and specifically from new frontiers in anthropology and critical theory is useful as it foregrounds the fragility of the movement and vulnerability of the people that practice it. The creation and protection of this canon and the use of methods to circulate and sample it become increasingly dangerous (political) in a world that devalues or attempts to erase black life and needs. Thus, one of the first things to be evacuated when alternative movements move into the mainstream are aspects of their canon that challenge the status quo. In the case of African American religious movements, this attention and protection of the black body is often de-emphasized or erased. The constant attacks on black bodies and the continued return to the body is what makes many African American Religious traditions suspect as they move to the mainstream. This is essentially the argument that Kelly Brown Douglas makes about the evolution of the black church and its critical tension with black bodies and black physicality. As the black church moves to the mainstream, the sacred and the physical black body are de-emphasized or at least moved away from the center of its analysis. Similarly, Divine's move away from the black body is found at the end of his life as a way to make space for a broader, "whiter" public or set of adherents and a disinterest in translating the critical role of the sacred black body to the maintenance and protection of democracy.³⁷

Again, this new method of black religions forces us to explicitly return to the black body as the quintessential space of black religion. Black theology does this and has historically been involved in this project. James Cone in one of his later works, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, evaluates the critical and crucial role of the flesh for black Christology and for black religious identity.³⁸ Furthermore, other black theologians that have focused on race such as J. Cameron Carter, Brian Bantum, and Willie Jennings have all highlighted the fleshiness of the black religious encounter.³⁹ However, this fleshiness stands in relationship to a theological category, whereas the method of world-making found in alternative religions helps us to understand the body as its own category. The black body is not a

³⁷ Evans, in his text, often highlights the short life span of black religious movements and he suggests that their continued claim to black lives and flourishing place them in direct opposition with the mainstream logics of democracy and capital.

³⁸ (Cone 2011).

³⁹ (Carter 2008; Jennings 2010; Bantum 2010).

mimesis or a substitute for the divine Christian body, rather it is the real and physical body that must be engaged as a part of the canonical practice. In this regard, the black body is sacred and profane and thus the black bodies sojourn through place and time often supplants the abstracted body of the dominant Christian or even democratic corpus. Wimbush's turn to Equiano is not simply a turn to a charismatic figure but it is the invocation of a black body, albeit a tightly controlled one, and his sojourn through the process of world-mapping and world-making. Similarly, Father Divine's black body is evoked to stand over and against the practices, politics, and logics that would attempt to erase it. Divine and his black body is God, and he disrupts the normative notion that whiteness and sacrality are equivalent. The songs sung about Divine, the creation of his sumptuous meals, and even his unwillingness to be controlled by logics of racialism all raise the question of the body and a raced body at the center of his religion. Moreover, most of the womanist interventions have addressed African American religion at the level of the body because the body is the space in which we take seriously African American experiences of empire and their creative alternatives to it. Williams starts with a broken and bruised Tamar in the wilderness. Kelly Brown Douglas in her latest work looks at the suppressed and dangerous ways that the body is negated in black Christian communities. She then looks to blues women as a resource or a tool to return to the black body.⁴⁰ These blues women are not just a signifier of the black body's importance, but rather like Baby Suggs Holy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Shug Avery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Tamar they designate the body as sacred in their ability to challenge the dominant regime and profane in their freedom to navigate their multiple identities as women, black, sexual beings, and outside of normative religious practices. From Divine to Williams to the newest generation of black theological thinkers, the black body and the canonical accounts of the black body, both the black female and male bodies, are the texts and ideas upon which black religion and black public spaces must meditate and interrogate.

This dogged attention to the body or creation of canonical texts and ideas around the sacred black body is the centerpiece of this new method on black religion. Karla Holloway, in her harrowing text on black death and dying, articulates this theme most provocatively when she argues that the central question of the 20th century for African Americans (and I add African American religion) is "where is the body or who has the body."⁴¹ While Holloway's text is often read as a meditation on black mourning in the twentieth century, I argue that she is presenting the myriad ways in which black communities deal with and respond to the fragile black body. Therefore, she is not just recounting mourning stories but the creation and production of alternative publics, canons, and ultimately religions.⁴² Therefore, the debates on who has the black body, how the black body should be handled, where the black body should be engaged are all theological and religious questions. These public engagements or new public presentations of the black body herald not just a new religion but an opening for new political and social formations (or a radical constellation of world-making movements).

In closing, the encounters and representation of the black body in the modern moment are the articulation of a critical canon for African American religion. I argue that it is the total container upon which African American religion rests. If the sacred black body is central to the black canon, it must not only be addressed, but it must be at the center of the study of African American religion. Theorists must consider how the centrality of the body might shift what we count as African American religion. The Black Lives Matter movement and their focus on the bruised, harassed body; the black humanist movements and their turn to black aesthetics; the question of black genocide and black gentrification, therefore, all have spiritual and religious consequences.⁴³ The turn to the body is not new for the

⁴⁰ (Douglas 2012).

⁴¹ (Holloway 2002).

⁴² It is not surprising that the last chapter of Holloway's text is the sermon delivered over her young son's body. Maurice Wallace's closing eulogy functions to highlight that Holloway's text is as much a history of black religion as it is a history of these communities' response to death and dying.

⁴³ See (Pinn 2010).

study of African American religion, but the focus on the production and circulation of canons and religions to respond to these new understandings and concerns about the black body is. It is therefore not surprising that studies on black respectability and black freedom have focused on the movement and new parameters of the black body, the logics of desire and the cartographies of black space, and the opening of new modalities for gendered and sexual expression.⁴⁴

6. Alternative African American Religions as a Model for Thinking about Alternative Publics

This attention to alternative African American religions, specifically the work of Wimbush and his theorization of Equiano, Father Divine and black divinity, and Delores Williams and her work on Tamar and black women's religions all point to the construction and the engagement of alternative publics. When I use the term alternative black public, they are members of the larger public, but they are considered alternative because they exist on the fringe of the dominant public discourse. Often, these alternative publics—sacred publics are usually a part of this group—are radically opposed to mainstream voices and providing options that are seen as distinct from normative voices. They are alternative not only due to their rejection of dominant tropes within US society, but they represent the variety of alternatives for thinking about the relationship between the black body, freedom and religion.⁴⁵ These alternatives provide an alternative to modernity that are distinct and bring unique readings of the body and black belonging to be debated within the black public. They are not anti-modern, but deeply embedded in their critique and public framing is a critique of the foundations of the modern world.

The alternative black religious space outlines new trajectories for thinking about black representation, black citizenship, and ultimately black visions for freedom.⁴⁶ These trajectories are important in that they challenge the mainstream and mainline itineraries that have masqueraded as dominant but are often in conversation and negotiation with these other models. This attention to these world-making movements is important as they must be read as comprehensive encounters with modernity, race, and modes of resistance rather than an escape from it. The movements are opening new venues for thought and therefore engaging in a public debate on what constitutes blackness and black freedom. This debate on the terms of blackness and black freedom must also be read as a debate on what constitutes black religion and black Christianity, and in this case what is the role of the black body. This method in African American religions, by recourse to new religions, forces the theorist to always engage the relationship between black freedom and flourishing and the role of black religion.⁴⁷ These alternative religions or alternative Christian movements are just one example of this, but it is clear from this project that this attention to sacrality, location, and to the construction of new publics must not only be attributed to what has traditionally been seen as new religions but this method must be applied to African American religion more broadly. This constructive and deliberative approach to African American religions points to its discourse, transactions, and world-making consequences.

The goal of re-engaging alternative religious movements in the black public sphere is not to examine or re-evaluate under-theorized religious movements, but to use the tool and resources of the alternative to think about the particular question of African American religion and black identity. This method forces us to more fully explore the logic and concerns of the production of sacrality, the

⁴⁴ Both Treva Lindsey and Brittney Cooper's works on the black body both reference the important role of black religion as a means of creating these codes and parameters of black respectability. These "experiments" with the black body can be argued as the opening or transgressive acts that inform the basis of a new religious movement. "Crunk Feminism" is therefore the opening salvo of not simply an ideological or disciplinary interruption, but it is the foundation for a new engagement with the body or a new religion.

⁴⁵ See (Higginbotham 1994; Frederick 2003).

⁴⁶ (Evans 2008).

⁴⁷ The point that ethnography can only provide us so much is critical to John Jackson's *Thin Description* and is very important for theorists of black religion to not already pre-determine the issues and publics upon which black religions intersect. This tension is at the heart of Jackson's analysis, and he is trying to warn us to use new religions or any methodology as a way to enter into the conversation of black publics and not determinative of it.

value and import of canonicity to competing black publics, and how the concerns around the black body are critical to understanding the role and production of African American religion. These alternative movements and this method of addressing the dissonance then helps us to rethink our engagement with more traditional religious movements. Reading the rise of socially conservative black evangelicals at the end of the twentieth century becomes a much more compelling exercise when we use the tools and methods of alternative publics and sacred black body to understand their engagement of black respectability, their use of the body, and their relationship to citizenship and empire.⁴⁸ The attention to this new method opens up myriad and nuanced debates around black life, black flourishing and black citizenship that are often imagined on the sidelines of many of these movements, but when engaged more explicitly we are provided a window into a growing debate on what constitutes black participation in the midst of late modern democracy and empire. The overarching argument here is that the methods by which we attend to African American religion matter. If we focus on African American religion as projects that ossify a long history of the hyper-spiritualization of black and brown people, then our study of religion will often function as a mechanism to support that argument. However, if our focus on African American religion is to address the complex and nuanced ways that it maps the world and engages with other social structures to make room for new ideas and newly emerging bodies, then the study of African American religion will provide insights into citizenship, democracy, and the complex and diffuse logics of black freedom.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ (Frederick 2003). See also Johnathan Walton and Kate Bowler as folks that are seriously looking at the production of black evangelicals in the last half of the twentieth century.

⁴⁹ (Jackson 2013).

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